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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000099

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SUBJECT: MFA WARNS EUR/UMB DIRECTOR AGAINST FURTHER USG
SANCTIONS

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Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Visiting EUR/UMB Director Boehme and DCM met with the MFA U.S. and Canada Desk Director Sergey Sergeyev on January 26. Sergeyev expressed the GOB's concern about the potential impact of the recently passed U.S. legislation, the Belarusian Democracy Reauthorization Act, stressing that new sanctions would worsen the already strained relationship between Washington and Minsk. Boehme reiterated the USG position that if the GOB wanted to avoid harsher measures, Belarus needed to implement democratic reforms, including the release of political prisoners. Boehme urged the MFA to grant a visa to EUR DAS David Kramer. End summary.

Sergeyev Interrogates, Warns to Behave

¶2. (C) Visiting UMB/EUR Desk Director Robert Boehme and DCM on January 26 met with the MFA's U.S. and Canada Desk Director Sergey Sergeyev. Poloff and Sergeyev's deputy director, Andrey Rzhesskiy, took notes. After praising what he called a good working relationship between the Department of State and the Belarusian MFA, Sergeyev bluntly asked Boehme to explain the purpose of his visit to Minsk, specifically his schedule and whom he planned to meet. Boehme replied that he came to Minsk for consultations with the Embassy and to meet with a diverse group of Belarusians to obtain a first-hand perspective of Belarus' economy, politics, and media. Sergeyev suggested Boehme conduct his visit within certain "parameters" in order to avoid problems in future visits.

Sanctions Will Ruin U.S. Image

¶3. (C) Sergeyev expressed the GOB's concern that the recently passed Belarusian Democracy Reauthorization Act (BDRA) could have negative consequences for Belarusian-U.S. relations. Sergeyev warned that possible U.S. sanctions, particularly economic sanctions, against Belarus would lead to a "dead-end," worsening the Belarusian people's image of the U.S. and reversing what Sergeyev viewed as a positive trend in U.S.-Belarusian relations.

¶4. (C) Boehme stressed to Sergeyev that the USG was concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus and

the latest presidential and municipal elections were examples of the fact that Belarus was not moving in the right direction. President Bush's mention of Belarus in his State of the Union address and the Congress' overwhelming approval of the BDRA were examples of the USG's commitment to democracy development in Belarus. Boehme told Sergeyev that the USG's policies towards the GOB were in the interests of the Belarusian people. If Belarus wanted to avoid harsh measures taken by the U.S., the GOB should start by releasing political prisoners and allowing civil society to play a larger role in Belarusian society. Boehme stressed that the USG is still considering its options on additional restrictive measures urged in the BDRA and assured Sergeyev that he would keep the Belarusian Embassy in Washington informed.

GOB Criticizes Recent USG Statements

15. (C) Sergeyev relayed to Boehme the GOB's disapproval of the USG's discussion of jailed presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin during a session of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in December, claiming the UNSC was not the appropriate body to discuss human rights issues. Boehme replied that the U.S. statement at the UNSC was appropriate, explaining to Sergeyev that the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus warranted the UNSC's attention.

16. (C) Sergeyev also disapproved of Ambassador's January 23 statements to the press in Mogilyov after taking part in a CitiHope delivery of medicines to the regional children's hospital. Sergeyev claimed Ambassador improperly used the humanitarian event to voice political opinions and noted that the Embassy had not allowed this to happen in earlier CitiHope events. He suggested the Embassy show restraint in order to not undermine further humanitarian assistance. DCM responded that while the main purpose of the Mogilyov trip

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was the humanitarian ceremony, it was in fact the state media who insisted on asking politically charged questions. By answering the questions, the Ambassador was fulfilling her duty as the senior U.S. representative in Belarus. The DCM reminded Sergeyev that the state media had shown similar aggressiveness during the January 14 municipal elections when they filmed Emboffs observing elections.

Sergeyev Searches for Areas of Cooperation

17. (C) Sergeyev pointed out that the Belarusian-U.S. economic ties had improved in the last few years, despite the absence of substantive dialogue between Minsk and Washington. He reminded Boehme of the countries' shared interests in the spheres of Trafficking in Persons, crime, narcotics, and terrorism. Sergeyev proposed closer cooperation in the energy sphere, particularly in atomic energy development, asking Boehme and DCM about assistance in nuclear energy structure development, security measures for nonproliferation, and an advertisement campaign promoting nuclear power based on U.S. models. Boehme cited the bilateral work in threat reduction at Belarus' Joint Institute for Power and Nuclear Research ("Sosny") as an example of potential cooperation between Belarus and the U.S. and expressed hope that the project would continue without further problems (reftel). However, bilateral cooperation in the sphere of nuclear energy required a better overall relationship between Belarus and U.S.; a relationship that currently did not exist.

Avoid the Media, But Not the State Press

18. (C) At the end of the official meeting, Sergeyev pulled Boehme aside and warned him not to give statements to the media. Boehme replied that he had meetings scheduled with

independent media representatives, but not in the capacity of a press conference and did not plan on giving statements. However, as Boehme and DCM stepped outside the MFA, the state national television channel BT and its notorious anti-American correspondent Yuriy Lednik were waiting next to the Embassy vehicle. DCM deflected Lednik, noting that Boehme was not speaking with the media as agreed with the MFA. When DCM later called the MFA for an explanation, Sergeyev replied that it was acceptable for Boehme to speak to the state media, just not independent journalists. DCM noted to Sergeyev that contact with state media would justify similar interaction with independent media.

Stewart